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ABSTRACT

In a 1978 followup to a 1977 survey of Louisiana legislators' perceptions about news media coverage of the annual legislative session, the legislators ranked the four major news media (daily/weekly newspapers, television, and radio) in terms of ten coverage factors. These factors included alertness, completeness, fairness, accuracy, interest, clarity, meaningfulness, aggressiveness, responsibility, and personal coverage. Three major points were gleaned from the data. First, the relative rankings of the four media remained the same from 1977 to 1978; daily newspapers ranked highest, followed by television, radio, and weekly newspapers (dailies were rated highest on nine of ten factors and overall coverage). Second, shifts occurred in the perceived strength and weakness of each medium; weaknesses shifted from completeness and meaningfulness in 1977 to lack of personal coverage in 1978, while the perceived strength of daily newspapers shifted from aggressiveness in 1977 to alertness in 1978. Third, a pronounced and universal dropoff of the ratings of all media occurred between 1977 and 1978, perhaps because of generally deteriorating relations between legislators and the media as a result of court litigation. (RL)

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LEGISLATORS RATE MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE 1978 LOUISIANA LEGISLATURE

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INTRODUCTION

In 1977 the authors initiated an annual survey of members of the Louisiana Legislature to ascertain their perceptions of how well Louisiana news media covered the past legislative session.* Since most citizens rely heavily on media coverage to learn what their lawmakers are doing, this type of ongoing research would seem to be important. If for no other reason, this annual survey provides feedback to the news media to let them know how the people they cover--the newsmakers--evaluate media coverage; as newsmakers, legislators perhaps are in a better position to evaluate such coverage than is the ordinary citizen, who usually has no way to compare what happened with what was reported.

This report is a follow-up to the initial 1977 study. It presents the legislators' evaluations of media coverage of the 1978 session, with some comparisons with the first set of data. As the data from annual surveys accumulate, they should provide evidence of trends and patterns.

PROCEDURE

The same methodology used in 1977 was used in the 1978 study. Shortly after the 1978 legislative session was concluded, each member of the legislature was sent a questionnaire which asked him/her to rank the four major news media--daily newspapers, weekly newspapers, television and radio--in terms of 10 coverage factors:

--Alertness to what was going on in general.
--Completeness of coverage.
--Fairness of the coverage.
--Accuracy of the coverage.
--Interest created and sustained.
--Clarity with which issues were explained.
--Meaningfulness of issues selected for coverage.
--Aggressiveness of media reporters.
--Responsibility exercised by media reporters.
--Personal coverage given by the media to the respondent.

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*"Legislators Rate Media Coverage of the 1977 Louisiana Legislature," LSU School of Journalism Research Bulletin, Vol. 1, No. 6, March 1978

Respondents were asked to give a score of from 1 to 10 to each of the four media, on each of these 10 factors. These factors represent various dimensions or aspects of coverage, but in addition respondents ranked the media on overall "Goodness of Coverage" as an internal check on the validity of the factors used. Usable returns were received from 49 legislators. Although certain biographical information was asked for to make some sub-sample comparisons, it is questionable whether the response rate would justify any sophisticated statistical tests; therefore, only average (mean) scores are reported.

Aside from the quantitative data obtained, some additional qualitative and subjective information was garnered from personal comments made by legislators on the questionnaire. Some of these are reported at the end of this paper.

FINDINGS

Three tables summarize the results of this survey.

Table No. 1 shows the average (mean) scores given to the four news media by the legislators on the 10 selected coverage factors for both 1977 and 1978. The data are cast side by side for easy comparison. (Maximum score = 10, minimum score =1)

Table No. 1

AVERAGE (MEAN) RATINGS OF NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE
(ON A SCALE FROM 1 TO 10) IN 1977 AND 1978:

Coverage Factor	Daily Newspapers		Weekly Newspapers		Television		Radio	
	1977	1978	1977	1978	1977	1978	1977	1978
Alertness	8.45	7.37	5.53	4.24	7.32	5.67	6.08	4.61
Completeness	7.76	6.73	5.00	4.02	6.11	4.90	5.29	4.20
Fairness	8.11	6.06	7.05	5.61	8.16	6.14	7.89	6.00
Accuracy	7.68	6.37	6.68	5.39	7.68	5.96	7.13	5.51
Interest	8.11	6.20	6.34	4.98	7.95	5.63	6.89	5.16
Clarity	7.77	6.16	6.26	4.88	7.32	5.47	6.34	5.16
Meaningfulness	7.58	6.04	6.32	4.82	7.54	5.51	6.66	5.06
Aggressiveness	8.47	6.00	5.34	5.18	7.62	5.76	5.76	5.27
Responsibility	7.68	5.94	6.45	4.84	7.59	4.98	6.53	4.84
Personalized Coverage	7.79	5.14	5.79	3.69	6.57	3.59	5.71	3.02
Average of 10 Factors:	7.94	6.20	6.08	4.77	7.39	5.36	6.43	4.88
Score on overall "Goodness of Coverage":	7.77	6.49	5.97	4.47	7.27	5.60	6.26	4.92

Information from Table No. 1 was used to generate the other two tables. Table No. 2 looks at the four media as a group (an intermedia comparison) and shows which medium was ranked highest and lowest by legislators on the 10 coverage factors for both years.

Table No. 2

INTERMEDIA COMPARISON OF COVERAGE FACTORS
BY 1977 AND 1978 LOUISIANA LEGISLATURES:

Which medium was:	In 1977	In 1978
Most alert?	Dailies	Dailies
Least alert?	Weeklies	Weeklies
Most complete?	Dailies	Dailies
Least complete?	Weeklies	Weeklies
Most fair?	Television	Television
Least fair?	Weeklies	Weeklies
Most accurate?	Dailies/TV	Dailies
Least accurate?	Weeklies	Weeklies
Most interesting?	Dailies	Dailies
Least interesting?	Weeklies	Weeklies
Most clear?	Dailies	Dailies
Least clear?	Weeklies	Weeklies
Most meaningful?	Dailies	Dailies
Least meaningful?	Weeklies	Weeklies
Most aggressive?	Dailies	Dailies
Least aggressive?	Weeklies	Weeklies
Most responsible?	Dailies	Dailies
Least responsible?	Weeklies	Weeklies/Radio
Most personalized coverage?	Dailies	Dailies
Least personalized coverage?	Radio	Radio
Best overall?	Dailies	Dailies
Worst overall?	Weeklies	Weeklies

Table No. 3 looks at each of the four media in terms of its greatest strength and its greatest weakness as perceived by legislators for both 1977 and 1978. This version of the "media report card" tells each medium what it is doing best, and what it is doing worst.

Table. No. 3

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF INDIVIDUAL MEDIA, AS PERCEIVED BY LEGISLATORS:

	In 1977	In 1978
Daily Newspapers		
Greatest Strength:	Aggressiveness	Alertness
Greatest Weakness:	Meaningfulness	Personal Coverage
Weekly Newspapers		
Greatest Strength:	Fairness	Fairness
Greatest Weakness:	Completeness	Personal Coverage
Television News		
Greatest Strength:	Fairness	Fairness
Greatest Weakness:	Completeness	Personal Coverage
Radio News		
Greatest Strength:	Fairness	Fairness
Greatest Weakness:	Completeness	Personal Coverage

DISCUSSION

Three major points can be gleaned from the tables:

First, the relative rankings of the four media remained basically the same in 1977 and 1978. As was the case in 1977, in 1978 daily newspapers generally ranked highest, followed by television, radio, and weekly newspapers in that order. Dailies were rated highest on 9 of 10 coverage factors and highest on overall Goodness of Coverage. Television was rated highest on one factor, Fairness, and this was also the case in 1977.

Weekly newspapers continued to receive the lowest ratings on most factors (with two exceptions) and on overall Goodness of Coverage. The exceptions: weeklies and radio tied for the lowest rating on Responsibility, and radio received the lowest rating of any medium on any factor--a 3.02 on Personal Coverage of respondents.

What explains the same relative ranking of the media? As was noted in the 1977 study, each medium by its very nature can do some things best; conversely, each has its limits, by tradition or by design. Daily newspapers are best suited for breadth and depth of coverage by virtue of being a print medium that comes out daily; that, plus the fact that usually they have larger staffs, gives them a distinct advantage over weekly newspapers insofar as several coverage factors are concerned. The scope of coverage explains a good deal, since weeklies traditionally are concerned only with local news; even radio and television news is broader in scope, with attention given to state, national and international news in addition to local coverage, albeit in a summary form due to the limited time available. (Or, more accurately, to the time made available; nothing aside from station policy prevents the broadcast media from devoting more time to news coverage. In the case of television, news is perhaps the most profitable local programming most stations do.)

Despite technical limitations, it would be fair to say that all the media could devote more time/space to news of the Legislature; what is required is a shifting of priorities and taking advantage of existent opportunities in some cases. Of course, there are variations within each medium, but some media units may not be doing what they can, within the technical limits imposed. And there is nothing inherent in the nature of any medium which prevents it from being fair, accurate, and responsible.

Second, there were some shifts in the greatest perceived strength and weakness of each medium. In 1977 the greatest weakness of television, radio, and weekly newspapers was their lack of Complete Coverage; for dailies it was their lack of Meaningful Coverage. In 1978 the greatest weakness of all the media was their lack of Personal Coverage of responding legislators.

In 1977 the greatest perceived strength of television, radio, and weekly newspapers was their Fairness. In 1978 the same evaluation prevailed. But for daily newspapers there was a shift: in 1977 their greatest strength was their Aggressiveness, but in 1978 it was their Alertness; even so, the Alertness rating was lower in 1978 than in 1977. Which brings up the final and perhaps most striking point of all in comparing the two years.

Third, in 1978 there was a pronounced and universal dropoff in the ratings given ALL the media. In fact, every medium received lower scores on each of the 10 coverage factors than it did in 1977. The average score for all media combined on overall Goodness of Coverage dropped from 6.82 to 5.37--about 21%. In some individual cases the dropoff was as much as 45%, e.g., television's drop on Personal Coverage from 6.57 in 1977 to 3.59 in 1978.

Despite the fact that daily newspapers continued to rank highest of all the media in relative terms, even dailies were rated lower on all factors in absolute terms.

What explains this rather sharp decline in absolute scores across all the media? It may be due, as some have suggested, to the relative dullness of the 1978 session; a dull session produces dull coverage and a general lack of interest by the media, so goes this rationale. But that seems doubtful; there were important issues taken up by the 1978 Legislature and some were emotional in nature (e.g., Equal Rights Amendment).

It might be speculated that the decline was due to a general deterioration of relations between government and the press. This souring of relations might have occurred due to recent litigation involving a few media units and some government officials, and to press reaction to sensitive legislation.* In such a climate of hostility, members of the Legislature may have acquired a jaundiced opinion about the press in general to the extent that they rated all segments of the press lower on all coverage factors.

In this connection it is interesting to note another shift which took place with regard to the perceived power of the press. In both years the question was asked: How do you feel about the power of the press? The results:

	1977	1978
--Press has too little power	0.0%	2.04%
--Press has too much power	26.32%	48.98%
--Press has just enough power	68.42%	46.94%
--No opinion	5.26%	2.04%

When nearly half of the responding legislators say the press has too much power--an increase of 86% in one year's time--it is obvious that <u>something</u> happened in 1978 to effect such a dramatic change in perspective.

The 1979 session of the Legislature may turn out to be a difficult one. Already it is projected that several controversial issues will be taken up, including some in which the press has a direct and selfish interest (e.g., re-writing the open meeting law, changing the eligibility for official journals, a tax on advertising, etc.). Both the Legislature and the press will have to be careful to avoid letting the "Adversary Relationship" get out of hand. So far, the press has one thing going for it--a perception of Fairness by legislators.

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*An excellent example is the Kidder Case. Baton Rouge Police Chief Howard Kidder sued the Capital City Press for libel; he won in the lower courts but on appeal the Louisiana Supreme Court overturned the decision; this resulted in several prominent government officials, including Governor Edwards, severely criticizing the high court's decision in general and Chief Justice Joe Sanders in particular. It was alleged that if the decision were allowed to stand, this would make all politicians fair game for the press and consequently it might prevent good men from seeking public office. Other litigation in 1978 involved several suits by the press to gain access to public meetings and public records, which may have further exacerbated government-press relations.

Whether relations continue to sour and whether the press will continue to enjoy a label of fairness are matters to be ascertained in the next survey in this series.

What follows are some comments reported by legislators in the 1978 study, selected to capture the flavor and range of opinion:

"My visits to the media are limited to invitations for press and TV interviews."

"Television news programs to some extent, and radio almost totally, make up their news items from the papers."

"Newspaper reporters often overlook the real meat of a committee hearing."

"It appears to some legislators that as a session wears on some reporters become lethargic or listless and miss things of importance while waiting for something 'juicy' or 'sensational' to occur."

"I like all the reporters and find that as a whole they are fairly objective."

"The media coverage of the Legislature was mostly bad."

"Once again the wire service guys used their opinions as the criteria for what is right and wrong, good and bad, rather than simply reporting the news without cryptic comment or snide remarks in the middle of their story. They should leave that to the editorial writers."

"They (reporters) completely overlooked the pension matter which is very important and needs the news media's help in making necessary corrections. Our pension systems are in trouble and the news media should place emphasis on the problem."

"The news media does not seek out news except when they think they can develop a scandal. They wait, too often, for a newsmaker to go to the reporter. By and large, they are lazy and myopic."

"In all fairness, weekly newspapers are good in printing the news if sent to them. They don't have the staff or funds to cover the Legislature adequately."

"Many members of the Capital Press Corps considered the 1978 session 'dull and/or boring.' The only thing dull or boring about the session was the way these same members of the Capital Press Corps covered the session."

"Democracy cannot exist without a free press; it may not last with an irresponsible press. It is the irresponsible reporting that I object to, that is the news is slanted, distorted or made to conform to the views of the writers instead of a factual presentation. A few reporters do an outstanding job."

"The legislative system moves so fast that it is impractical for the press, and often the legislators, to gain the full affect of amendments or the full intent of long bills. Members of the press attempt to cover the most important statements or bills which they feel will be of public interest. However, often on simple amendments the full affect is not understood by the press. Therefore, the message is not carried to the public. Aften, dailies will assign different reporters to the two houses and again the continuity of hearings on important legislation is lost. I find, too, that members of the press fail to speak to many of our members but place great emphasis on certain members of the Legislature. Being independent, not necessarily for the administration, labor or industrial groups, changes that I suggest are overlooked, especially in committees. I am not alone and feel many good legislators dedicate themselves to improving government but are seldom given any recognition for such dedication and service."

"The American people can be trusted to make the right decision if given the facts. The news media fail to give the public all the facts. Much of what is printed is inaccurate and leads the reader to an incorrect conclusion. Prejudices and personal philosophy heavily influence some reporters. My overall grade is a 'C-'."

I know it's boring to sit through committee hearings, but sometimes the press leaves before the real issues come out. Also the press doesn't present all the facts on bad legislation or its author. They (the press) should also write more about the issues and votes that are taken."

"I feel that the veteran newspaper, TV and radio reporters with some background knowledge of Louisiana politics do a very decent job. I've found we have new, inexperienced individuals who try but have little fundamental knowledge of the State or its cultural and political history to know what is happening. Personally, the media have been fair to me but too much cynicism and a 'mad dog approach' by a few have hurt all."

"The media miss many stories of importance to the citizens. Unfortunately no single newspaper or station has the manpower to do anywhere near an accurate job of ferreting out what takes place other than on the floors of the Senate and the House, the governor's press conferences and selected committee hearings. If the media are to do a better job they will have to consolidate their resources at the capital."

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